

Message Text

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CINCPAC HONOLULU

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 3 BANGKOK 3028

LIMDIS

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: XGDS-3

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SUBJ: EVALUATION OF KHUKRIT CABINET

REF: BANGKOK 2650

SUMMARY: ALTHOUGH IT IS STILL SOMEWHAT EARLY TO EVALUATE THE PERFORMANCE OF THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT DURING ITS ALMOST 10 MONTHS IN OFFICE, ITS RECORD IS BOUND TO BE AN ISSUE IN THE APRIL ELECTIONS. ITS MOST IMPORTANT, SINGLE ACHIEVEMENT WAS PROBABLY TO SURVIVE THIS LONG, DESPITE NUMEROUS PREDICTIONS THAT IT WOULD NOT LAST EVEN SIX MONTHS. ITS MOST SIGNIFICANT LEGISLATIVE ACHIEVEMENT WAS PROBABLY THE PASSAGE OF THE BUDGET, WHICH COMPLETED SENATE ACTION ON OCT 22, 1975. ALSO SIGNIFICANT WERE EFFORTS TO REDRESS URBAN-RURAL IMBALANCES. THE ACTUAL PERFORMANCE OF THE THAI BUREAUCRACY IN CARRYING OUT THE BUDGETARY PROGRAM DURING FY1976 WILL PROVIDE A MORE ACCURATE JUDGMENT OF GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE IN THIS KEY RESPECT. THE GOVERNMENT WAS UNABLE TO BROADEN ITS POLITICAL BASE, ITS LEGISLATIVE RECORD WAS SPOTTY, AND ITS HANDLING OF THE ISSUE OF PRICE INCREASES FOR PETROLEUM, RICE AND SUGAR WAS FUMBLING AND UNCERTAIN. END SUMMARY

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1. SET OUT BELOW ARE SOME OF THE PRINCIPAL ACHIEVEMENTS

AND FAILURES OF THE GOVERNMENT LED BY PRIME MINISTER KHUKRIT PRAMOT DURING ITS ALMOST 10 MONTHS IN OFFICE, FROM MARCH 20, 1975 TO JANUARY 12, 1976. IT REMAINS IN OFFICE IN CARETAKER STATUS UNTIL REPLACED BY A GOVERNMENT ISSUING FROM THE ELECTIONS OF APRIL 4, COMMITTED TO THE PERFORMANCE OF ONLY ROUTINE ADMINISTRATIVE FUNCTIONS. THE RECORD OF THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT IS LIKELY TO BE DISCUSSED AT LENGTH IN THE CURRENT ELECTION CAMPAIGN.

2. PERHAPS A GENERAL COMMENT WOULD BE IN ORDER TO DESCRIBE THE ATTITUDE THAT PRIME MINISTER KHUKRIT BROUGHT TO THE PERFORMANCE OF HIS DUTIES. KHUKRIT'S TACTIC WAS TO PROVIDE EVERY OPPORTUNITY HE COULD -- AND STILL SURVIVE -- FOR UNITS OR GROUPS OF THAI SOCIETY TO VENT THEIR FRUSTRATIONS AND BLOW OFF STEAM, WITHOUT FEAR OF REPRESSION OR HAVING THE LID PUT ON. HE FOLLOWED THIS POLICY VERY CONSCIOUSLY AS A STROKE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL INSIGHT INTO HIS PEOPLE. IN DOING THIS HE MORE OR LESS CONSCIOUSLY AVOIDED CREATING THE IMAGE OF BEING A "LAW AND ORDER" PRIME MINISTER -- SOMETHING WHICH OTHER THAI POLITICAL OR MILITARY FIGURES COULD HAVE DONE MORE SUCCESSFULLY. WHILE TREATING A WIDE RANGE OF THAI PRESSURE GROUPS WITH CONSIDERABLE PERMISSIVENESS, HE CONTINUED TO USE THE BUDGET AS HIS PRIMARY INSTRUMENT TO REDISTRIBUTE RESOURCES FROM BANGKOK TO THE PROVINCES.

3. POSITIVE ACHIEVEMENTS - PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT ACHIEVEMENT OF KHUKRIT WAS TO FORM A GOVERNMENT AND MAKE IT SURVIVE FOR ALMOST 10 MONTHS, DESPITE CONSTANT AND USUALLY ADVERSE PRESSURE. MOST OBSERVERS GAVE IT SMALL CHANCE OF SURVIVING EVEN SIX MONTHS, AT THE TIME IT WAS CONFIRMED IN OFFICE BY A VOTE OF 140-124 IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ON MARCH 20, 1975. IT WAS THEN WIDELY PREDICTED IN THAI POLITICAL CIRCLES THAT THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO PASS THE BUDGET. HOWEVER, IT DID SO ON OCTOBER 10, 1975 BY A MARGIN OF 139-100 IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES (THERE WERE CLEARLY SUBSTANTIAL AND DELIBERATE ABSTENTIONS AMONG THE 269 MEMEMBERS).

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4. KHURKRIT TERMED THE FY 1976 RTG BUDGET THE "PEOPLE'S BUDGET". HE CALLED IT " THE MOST IMPORTANT TOOL" AVAILABLE TO HIM TO DIRECT AND DISTRIBUTE THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS. MORE SPECIFICALLY, HE INCREASED THE ALLOCATION FOR THE ROYAL IRRIGATION DEPARTMENT TO B3.2 BILLION, AN INCREASE OF ONE-THIRD, COMPARED TO FY1975. (THE THAI FISCAL YEAR RUNS FROM OCT 1 TO THE FOLLOWING SEPT 30.) THE BUDGET FOR THE MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATION WAS INCREASED FROM B4.2 BILLION IN FY1975 TO B5.3 BILLION IN FY1976 (LARGELY FOR THE CONSTRUCTION AND UPGRADING OF

RURAL ROADS AND WATERWAYS). THE BUDGET FOR THE MINISTRY OF PUBLIC HEALTH WAS INCREASED FROM B1.5 BILLION IN FY 1975 TO B2.7 BILLION IN FY1976. (THESE INCREASES COVERED INITIATION OF A FREE MEDICAL CARE PROGRAM FOR THE POOR, EXPANSION OF PROVINCIAL HEALTH FACILITIES, AND IMPROVED MEDICAL TRAINING FACILITIES.) THE TAMBON (TOWNSHIP) COUNCIL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM WAS INCREASED FROM B2.5 BILLION IN FY 1975 TO B3.5 BILLION IN FY1976. (THIS PROGRAM, CONSIDERED MORE FULLY BELOW, COVERS DIRECT ALLOCATION OF FUNDS FOR RURAL PUBLIC WORKS TO THE TAMBON COUNCILS). ALL OF THESE INCREASES WERE AIMED AT TRANSFERRING GREATER RESOURCES TO THE RURAL AREA, IN SUPPORT OF PROGRAMS OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPROVEMENT IN THAT PART OF THE COUNTRY WHERE THE GREAT BULK OF THAILAND'S POPULATION LIVES. HOW MUCH OF THIS TRANSFER OF RESOURCES TO THE RURAL AREA IS REAL, RATHER THAN APPARENT, WILL DEPEND ON HOW THE GOVERNMENT BUREAUCRACY IMPLEMENTS THE BUDGETARY PROVISIONS. TO THE EXTENT THAT INCREASED APPROPRIATIONS GO TO CONSTRUCTION OF OFFICE SPACE AND OTHER STRUCTURES OF DIRECT INTEREST TO THE BUREAUCRACY, THE IMPACT OF THESE INCREASES ON THE RURAL POPULATION WILL BE THAT MUCH LESS.

5. ALTHOUGH OF LESSER FISCAL IMPACT THAN THE BUDGETARY INCREASES NOTED ABOVE, THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT INTRODUCED A PARTICULARLY IMAGINATIVE AND INNOVATIVE SCHEME IN THE FORM OF THE TAMBON DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM (TDP -- SEE REFTEL FOR MORE DETAILED ANALYSIS). KHUKRIT REFERRED TO THE TDP IN THE PROGRAM HE PRESENTED TO PARLIAMENT IN MARCH, 1975, ENACTED A BILL COVERING IT IN APRIL, 1975, AND CONTINUED IT IN THE BUDGET APPROVED IN OCTOBER, 1975. BRIEFLY, THE PROGRAM CALLS FOR THE ALLOCATION OF APPROX. B500,000 (ABOUT US\$25,000) TO EACH TAMBON (AN ADMINISTRATIVE ENTITY APPROXIMATELY EQUIVALENT TO
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A U.S. TOWNSHIP) IN THE COUNTRY. EACH TAMBON DECIDES, AFTER APPROPRIATE CONSULTATION WITH THE POPULATION, HOW TO SPEND THE FUNDS--E.G., ON ROADS, BRIDGES, SCHOOLHOUSES, MEETING PLACES, ETC. BEGINNING WITH AN ALLOCATION OF B2.5 BILLION (ABOUT US\$125 MILLION) FOR FY75, AN ALLOCATION OF B3.5 BILLION (ABOUT US\$175 MILLION) WAS SET ASIDE FOR FY76. INITIAL INDICATIONS ARE THAT, ON THE WHOLE, THE FUNDS WERE SPENT WITH CARE AND WITH A MINIMUM OF CORRUPTION. MORE IMPORTANTLY, THE LOWER ELEMENTS OF THAI ADMINISTRATION WERE DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN DECISIONS REGARDING MATTERS OF DIRECT INTEREST TO THEM. OUR CONSULS REPORT THAT THE TAMBON DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM IS SEEN TO HAVE BEEN AN INITIATIVE OF PRIME MINISTER KHUKRIT, AND THEY EXPECT HIM TO BENEFIT FROM IT IN THE NATIONAL ELECTION OF APRIL 4, ALTHOUGH NOT RPT NOT TO A MAJOR EXTENT.

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6. THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT UNDERTOOK SEVERAL INITIATIVES IN THE FOREIGN POLICY FIELD, AIMED AT ADJUSTING THAILAND TO THE PROFOUND CHANGES IN THE INTERNATIONAL SITUATION CONSEQUENT ON THE FALL OF CAMBODIA AND SOUTH VIET-NAM TO THE COMMUNISTS, AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNIST CONTROL IN LAOS. IN JULY, 1975, KHUKRIT VISITED THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND ARRANGED FOR NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS BETWEEN THAILAND AND THAT COUNTRY. IN OCTOBER AND DECEMBER, 1975, FOREIGN MINISTER CHATCHAI WAS ABLE TO MEET WITH CAMBODIAN DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER IENG SARY AND TO TAKE THE FIRST STEPS (STILL INCOMPLETE, HOWEVER) WHICH MAY LEAD TO FULL NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS WITH CAMBODIA. A SERIES OF BORDER CLASHES ALONG THE MEKONG RIVER, IN OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER, 1975, TROUBLED RELATIONS BETWEEN THAILAND AND LAOS, DESPITE THE CONTINUED PRESENCE OF EMBASSIES OF BOTH COUNTRIES IN THE OTHER'S CAPITAL. THAILAND CLOSED ITS BORDER WITH LAOS ON NOVEMBER 17, IN RETALIATION FOR THE INCIDENTS ON THE MEKONG, AND DID NOT REOPEN IT UNTIL JANUARY, 1 1976. RTG FIGURES CONTINUE TO CHARGE THAT LAOS IS SUPPORTING THAI INSURGENTS IN THE NORTHEAST. CONSEQUENTLY, RELATIONS BETWEEN THAILAND AND LAO REMAIN STRAINED AND ESSENTIALLY UNFRIENDLY. THERE HAS BEEN NO EVIDENT PROGRESS AND VIRTUALLY NO CONTACT BETWEEN THAILAND AND THE COMMUNIST AUTHORITIES IN EITHER

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NORTH OR SOUTH VIET-NAM SINCE THE ABORTIVE VISIT OF DRV
AND PRG DELEGATIONS TO BANGKOK IN MAY, 1975.

7. HOPES THAT FAILED - THE LIST OF EFFORTS THAT FAILED
COULD BE LONG OR SHORT, BUT THE SIMPLEST JUDGEMENT IS THAT
THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT WAS UNABLE TO BEAT THE SYSTEM WITHIN
WHICH IT HAD TO OPERATE. BASED ON A SLENDER MAJORITY IN THE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, KHUKRIT WAS REQUIRED, DURING HIS
ENTIRE TENURE AS PRIME MINISTER, TO SPEND AN INORDINATE AMOUNT
OF TIME AND EFFORT IN KEEPING HIS FRAGILE COALITION TOGETHER.
HE SOUGHT STEADILY TO BROADEN THE BASE OF HIS GOVERNMENT,
MOST NOTABLY IN THE CABINET RESHUFFLE OF JAN 8. HOWEVER, THE
RESHUFFLE STRENGTHENED HIS GOVERNMENT ONLY marginally, EVEN
ON PAPER, AND THE FORCES SET LOOSE BY THE RESHUFFLE WOULD
QUICKLY HAVE LED TO HIS LOSS OF GOVERNMENT IN A NO-CONFIDENCE
MOTION, HAD KHUKRIT NOT MOVED TO FORESTALL HIS CRITICS
BY OBTAINING ROYAL ASSENT TO THE DISSOLUTION OF THE HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES. IN SHORT, KHUKRIT HAD AN INHERENTLY UNSTABLE
COALITION CABINET OF 16 (AND, AFTER THE RESHUFFLE, 17)
PARTIES IN AN UNGOVERNABLE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, IN WHICH
23 PARTIES WERE REPRESENTED.

8. AS A CONSEQUENCE OF THE FRAGMENTED CHARACTER OF THE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, THE LEGISLATIVE RECORD OF THE
KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT WAS SPOTTY. SOME 29 DRAFT BILLS WERE
INTRODUCED BY THE GOVERNMENT, WHILE ONLY SIX BILLS (INCLUDING
THE BUDGET) WERE PASSED. ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING
OF THE SIX PASSED, PROVIDING FOR THE DIRECT ELECTION OF
VILLAGE AND SUB-DISTRICT CHIEFS, PROVIDES A CURIOUS EXAMPLE
OF AMBIVALENCE ON THE PART OF THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT. THE
BILL WAS ORIGINALLY INTRODUCED BY THE GOVERNMENT BUT
REJECTED BY THE SENATE AND RE-PASSED BY THE HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES IN EARLY OCTOBER. THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT
DEVELOPED CONSIDERABLE RESERVATIONS CONCERNING IT AND
WITHHELD FORWARDING THE BILL TO THE KING FOR THE ROYAL
ASSENT UNTIL THE DISSOLUTION OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON JANUARY 12. ONE OF THE LAST ACTS OF THE GOVERNMENT
PRIOR TO THE DISSOLUTION WAS TO ARRANGE TO HAVE THE BILL
FORWARDED TO THE KING. IF IT DOES NOT RECEIVE THE ROYAL
ASSENT WITHIN 90 DAYS, (I.E., BY APRIL 13), THE BILL WILL
LAPSE. IF APPROVED BY THE KING AFTER THE NATIONAL ELECTIONS,
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THE LOCAL ELECTIONS WOULD BE HELD WITHIN A FURTHER 90
DAYS. WE UNDERSTAND THAT THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT IS PREPARING
FURTHER AMENDMENTS TO THE LOCAL ELECTIONS BILL, BUT ASSUME
THAT IN THE PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES THIS EFFORT CAN HARDLY
HAVE HIGH PRIORITY. WHY THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT PRESSED

FOR ENACTMENT OF THE BILL IN THE FIRST PLACE, THEN CALLED FOR A SPECIAL SESSION OF PARLIAMENT TO ENSURE ITS RE-PASSAGE AFTER DEFEAT IN THE SENATE, AND FINALLY FORWARDED IT TO THE KING ONLY AFTER LONG DELAY, IS DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND.

9. THE EMBASSY HAS REPORTED EXTENSIVELY ON THE HANDLING BY THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT OF INCREASES IN THE PRICE OF PETROLEUM PRODUCTS, RICE, AND SUGAR. THE MERITS OF THE PRICE INCREASES SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES (FOR OIL, DUE TO THE TREND OF INTERNATIONAL PRICES OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS; FOR RICE, DUE TO A POLICY DECISION BY THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT TO INCREASE THE PRICE OF RICE TO THE FARMERS; FOR SUGAR, TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT CHANGES IN INTERNATIONAL SUGAR PRICES. IN HANDLING THESE MATTERS, KHUKRIT SHOWED HIMSELF TO BE FUMBLING, UNCERTAIN, AND TIMID, DISPLAYING A FAULTY, AND POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS FAILURE TO ACT SWIFTLY AND DECISIVELY WHERE PRICES OF MAJOR MARKET COMMODITIES ARE CONCERNED.

10. MUCH OF THE PRESSURE BROUGHT TO BEAR ON THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS TO RAISE THE PRICE OF PETROLEUM PRODUCTS, RICE, AND SUGAR WAS FOCUSED BY THAILAND'S FLEDGLING ORGANIZED LABOR FORCE. DURING THE PAST TEN MONTHS ORGANIZED LABOR HAS ENJOYED GREAT FREEDOM FROM LEGAL AND MORAL RESTRAINT AS THE RTG BUREAUCRATS AND KHUKRIT HIMSELF HESITATED TO ENFORCE THE PROVISIONS OF THE LABOR RELATIONS ACT ENACTED IN FEB. OF 1975. AS A RESULT, THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE WAS FREQUENTLY FORCED TO MEDIATE EVEN THE MOST MINOR LABOR DISPUTES, A PRACTICE THAT ALL TOO OFTEN MEANT CAPITULATION TO THE DEMANDS OF LABOR. BY JANUARY OF 1976, LABOR AND BUSINESS LEADERS WERE DISENCHANTED WITH KHUKRIT, THE LABOR RELATIONS ACT, AND THE LABOR DEPARTMENT BUREAUCRACY EMPOWERED, BUT UNWILLING, TO ENFORCE IT.

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11. SIMILARLY, THE GOVERNMENT'S PERFORMANCE HAS BEEN UNEVEN WITH REGARD TO POLICY DECISIONS REQUIRED BY MAJOR COMMERCIAL ENTERPRISES. THE CANCELLATION OF THE TEMCO TIN MINING CONCESSION IN THE LAST HOURS OF THE SENI GOVERNMENT ADVERSELY AFFECTED THE INVESTMENT CLIMATE. THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT WORKED OUT WHAT WAS POSSIBLY THE BEST POSSIBLE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM BY GRANTING A MANAGEMENT CONTRACT TO BILLITON, WITH THE OTHER STOCKHOLDER IN TEMCO, UNION CARBIDE, SELLING OUT ITS INTEREST TO BILLITON. HOWEVER, SMUGGLERS AND STUDENTS CONTINUE TO AGITATE AGAINST BILLITON RESUMING OPERATIONS AND THE CARETAKER GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN RELUCTANT TO CONFRONT OPPOSING GROUPS. IN THE ABSENCE OF SECURE MINING CONDITIONS BILLITON HAS NOT RESUMED OPERATIONS. NEW JERSEY ZINC, UNABLE TO SECURE LONG-PROMISED GO-AHEAD FROM EITHER BUREAUCRATS IN THE MINISTRY OR FROM THE CABINET LAST WEEK SUSPENDED PLANS TO CONSTRUCT A \$90 MILLION ZINC SMELTER AT TAK. HOWEVER, IN THE ABSENCE OF PARLIAMENT AND AGAINST ADVICE OF RESPONSIBLE BUREAUCRATS, THE CABINET APPEARS ON THE VERGE OF TRANSFERRING VALUABLE AIR ROUTE RIGHTS (TO HONG KONG, TAIWAN, JAPAN, AND KOREA) TO AIR SIAM, A PRIVATE AIRLINE DEEPLY IN DEBT AND IN WHICH MEMBERS OF THE ROYAL FAMILY AND RANKING GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS ARE SHAREHOLDERS, FROM THAI INTERNATIONAL, THE RTG'S HERETOFORE PROFITABLE AIRLINE. SUPPORTERS OF THAI INTER-
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NATIONAL CHARGE THAT CERTAIN CABINET MEMBERS SUPPORT AIR SIAM'S CLAIMS FOR REASONS OF PERSONAL PROFIT. THIS CASE ILLUSTRATES THAT CABINET DECISIONS DEPEND ON MOTIVATION. THE CABINET IS SUPPOSED TO RULE ON THE AIR ROUTE QUESTION FEBRUARY 10.

12. PERHAPS THE MOST OMINOUS DEVELOPMENT, PARTICULARLY SINCE THE DISSOLUTION OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, HAS BEEN KHUKRIT'S ACCEPTANCE OF SEVRAL FIGURES WITH QUESTIONABLE BACKGROUNDS INTO HIS SOCIAL ACTION PARTY. KHUKRIT HAS COMMENTED TO THE AMBASSADOR THAT HE WOULD BE PREPARED TO ACCEPT EVEN "BUFFALO THIEVES" INTO HIS PARTY IN ORDER TO ENSURE THE ELECTION OF A GOVERNMENT WITH A STABLE MAJORITY. DESPITE KHUKRIT'S PRESENT REPUTATION AS AN ATTRACTIVE, ARTICULATE, IMAGINATIVE FIGURE CLEAN OF CORRUPTION, HIS ACCEPTANCE OF THESE FIGURES MAY ENSURE THAT

ANY FUTURE GOVERNMENT HE MIGHT HEAD WOULD BE QUICKLY TAINTED
WITH CORRUPTION AND SCANDAL.

13. CONCLUSION - CONSIDERING THE CONDITIONS HE FACED,
KHUKRIT TURNED IN A GOOD BUT SOMEWHAT SPOTTY PERFORMANCE
AS PRIME MINISTER. IN SOME RESPECTS HIS FAILURES ARE ATTRIBUTABLE
TO THE SYSTEM WITHIN WHICH HE HAS TO OPERATE. HE IS TRYING
TO BRING ABOUT THE ELECTION OF A STABLE GOVERNMENT, WITH
A MANAGEABLE MAJORITY IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.
WITH SUCH A BASE HE HOPEFULLY CAN THEN SEEK TO IMPLEMENT
THE AMBITIOUS REFORM PROGRAM HE ORIGINALLY PRESENTED TO
THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ON MARCH 19, 1975, THE GREAT
BULK OF WHICH REMAINS TO BE ENACTED INTO LAW. WITHOUT
GOING INTO AN EXTENDED ANALYSIS OF THE ELECTION PROSPECTS
(IT IS TOO EARLY IN THE CAMPAIGN), IT IS PROBABLY FAIR
TO SAY THAT HIS PROSPECTS FOR OBTAINING SUCH A MANAGEABLE
MAJORITY ARE MARGINAL, AT BEST. IN ATTEMPTING TO
ACHIEVE SUCH A MAJORITY THROUGH THE ADDITION OF DUBIOUS
FIGURES TO HIS PARTY, HE MAY HAVE SERIOUSLY MORTGAGED HIS
FUTURE AND THAT OF A DEMOCRATIC THAILAND.
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